Bruno Biermann, Silas Klein Cardoso,
Fabio Porzia, Christoph Uehlinger (eds.)

Challenging Dichotomies and Biases in the Study of the Ancient Southern Levant

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Beyond Ethnicity: Outline of a Renewed Approach to the Levantine Divine Landscape*

Fabio Porzia

Abstract

The religious history of the ancient Levant has been described as a juxtaposition of ethnic pantheons, each one dominated by the major deity of a "nation" or "tribe." Focussing on the Iron Age, this paper will plead for a shift in emphasis from religious differences based on presumed ethnic identities and postulated cultural borders to the overall similarity across the Levantine religious landscape. The paper introduces and discusses five heuristic notions that can be helpful to outline the Levantine religious landscape in further research: "gods as networks," "cultural infrastructure," "transposability", "Levant," "glocalization and adaption." Using these notions, divinities can be conceived as "material entanglements" made up of shared, variously configured features, and therefore understandable and translatable for each social group according to its own specific needs.

1. Ethnicity Foregrounded

This paper contains the programmatic lines and the methodological framework of a renewed approach to the study of ancient Levantine religion\s. Despite the widespread interpretation of the Levant as a "cultural crossroad," the focus on pre-Hellenistic religion\s is "fragmented" or even "balkanized" into many different disciplines and regional studies often constrained by modern political boundaries.[1] Once they put aside the generic labels of "Canaanite" religions, "North-West Semitic" languages and, for the Greco-Roman period, "Oriental cults,"[2] scholars organize and read the relevant material on ethnic and ethnopolitical grounds. The widespread criticism against the emphasis on and the (mis)use of this approach, from humanities and social sciences to archaeology,[3] had only a minor impact on the religio-historical studies, where the notions of "ethnic pantheons" and "national gods" are common.[4] The study of

* The present article results from research carried out by the author as PI of the project "Trespassing Religions, Identities and Borders in the Ancient Levant" (TRIBAL), funded by the European Union NextGenerationEU and the Italian Ministry of University and Research, and hosted by the Institute of Heritage Science of the Italian National Research Council (CNR-ISPC).

1 See, respectively, Routledge 2017; Porter 2016.

2 Kaizer 2006.

3 For an overview focused on the southern Levant see Porzia 2022: 295–303.

4 See, recently, Mei 2024, 124–155. On the connection between "nation" and "identity," see also Doak 2020: 9–11.

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religion\s in the ancient Levant, therefore, suffers the limits of an "ethnological reasoning"[5] and an "ethnogeography," a space which cannot anymore be conceived without its ethnic boundaries. As a result, the criticism developed in recent years in anthropology and postcolonial studies against the profusion of identity and ethnicity in social sciences fell into the void.[6]

However, the traditional division into ethnic religions and pantheons (Phoenician, Aramaean, Israelite, Philistine, etc.),[7] which are thought to correspond to each other without being identical, is the outcome of an oversimplification, because it conflates, reifies, and hypostatizes different religious elements into a priori established, static ethnic boundaries. Moreover, by focusing on ethnic pantheons or gods conceived as individual persons,[8] scholars gave up to fully address the high level of commonality in different forms of Levantine religious practices and their analysis often suffers from misleading oppositions between "the particular" and "the general," "the local" and "the regional," and "the exceptional" and "the ordinary." Moreover, if scholars overlook the Levantine *koine* or network, then the few and rare attempts to approach the study of the religious dimension on a broader scale, such as on a Mediterranean scale,[9] risk remaining without further development.

Although religion, disregarding its problematic definition, entails a much larger spectrum of phenomena than gods, the chosen focus here is on the way gods and goddesses were conceptualized and crafted. Using "the lens of divinity" does not only function as an "organising principle," nor "as a window to the historical, the sociological, the performance of cult, the ideological, and the aesthetic."[10] The focus of the divine Levantine landscape corroborates the understanding of the Levant, not relying anymore on ethnic groups and political borders, but depending on entangled communities and a largely shared cultural apparatus.

Besides more or less apologetic attempts to inscribe the Biblical texts and theology within the ancient Near East,[11] gods and goddesses have never been studied as expressions – not to say agents, although fictive – of a common, not to say unified, regional history. In this regard, divinities not only witness mutual relationships between societies but, more deeply, reflect a human willing to

5 On this terminology, see Amselle 1998: 5–24. See also Porzia 2018: 12–13.
6 Brubaker and Cooper 2000.
7 See, Block 1988; Lipiński 1995; Niehr 1998; Xella 2007; del Olmo Lete 2008; Bonnet and Niehr 1996; not to mention the overflowing production about Israelite religion(s), see Zevit 2001. And see most recently, Schmitt 2020, who again follows a "tribal/national" subdivision before discussing structures of religions of Palestine in comparative perspective.
8 Bonnet 1988; 1996; Xella 1991; Cornelius 1994; 2004; Niehr 2003; Münnich 2013; Allen 2015; Wilson-Wright 2016. For YHWH, see Römer 2015, and Lewis 2020.
9 See, for instance, the main outputs of the ERC project "Mapping Ancient Polytheisms. Cult Epithets as an Interface between Religious Systems and Human Agency:" Bonnet *et al.* 2022; Palamidis and Bonnet 2024. On a programmatic level, see also Graf 2007.
10 Lewis 2020: 9–10.
11 See, as a programmatic article, Smith 1952, and more recently Hundley 2022.

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understand others and being understood by others. According to a history of religion\s' perspective, rather than a biblical or theological approach, finally, the focus of this approach is more on human agency and interactions than on gods, especially because the discipline is, since its origins in antiquity,[12] characterized by a comparative dimension. Religion is therefore regarded as a ceaseless construction, through individual and group actions, within the loose parameters provided by local tradition and social institutions, and whose non-human referents (deities) are constantly in need of investment-labour of various kinds to maintain their plausibility.[13] Accordingly, one of the main tasks of each religious agent – from the cult specialist to the craftspeople involved in producing religious artifacts and the worshipper – is to make the addressed deity plausible, understandable, and present. Therefore, the perspective adopted here focuses on the role of human agency in the making of divine beings and on rendering them intelligible or even transposable.

2. Setting the Stage

2.1. Many Paradigm Shifts

The present approach adopts a multidisciplinary perspective, encompassing the fields of iconography and epigraphy, history, biblical studies, and history of religion\s, and benefits from many paradigm shifts occurred in these disciplines. Archaeologists, for instance, have extensively studied external influences and local or regional peculiarities of Levantine artifacts, addressing, among others features, the role of workshops, where local artists adopted and adapted foreign elements into distinctive styles.[14] It has become clear that the creation of closely-knit systems of style groups cannot always depend on traditional notions of domination and subordination, cultural diffusionism, imperialism, "primary" or "secondary" states, nor on the dynamics between "core" and "periphery." An alternative theoretical framework has been developed, largely inspired by cultural anthropology and postcolonial studies, which stresses connectivity and related notions such as "peer polity interaction," "emulation," "hybridization," "creolization," "entanglement," and "middle ground."[15] Lately Marian H. Feldman has proposed the notion of "communities of style" in order to emphasize a pan-Levantine network of skilled practices instead of a mosaic of

12 Borgeaud 2004.
13 Albrecht *et al.* 2018: 569.
14 Suter and Uehlinger 2005; Brown and Felman 2014.
15 See, respectively: Renfrew and Cherry 1986; Higginbotham 2000; Nitschke 2007; Staubli 2016; Stordalen and LaBianca 2021; Bonnet 2015; Martin 2017.

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bounded, independent workshops,[16] in particular in the so-called minor arts and mass media production.[17]

Historians as well have started to develop new approaches. It is particularly relevant, for instance, that Margreet L. Steiner and Ann E. Killebrew coined the notion of "Levantinism" "as the most appropriate designation for this region's cultural hybridity, with all its local particularities."[18] More recently, by elaborating the notion of "Levantine entanglements," Terje Stordalen and Øystein S. LaBianca made a case "for seeing the Levant as a world region and hence a relevant unit for writing global history."[19] In this regard, we observe a relevant shift in the studies from monographs, projects, and exhibitions dedicated to hypostatized civilizations in splendid isolation (the Phoenicians, the Arameans, etc.) to the increasing interest in "contact" or "buffer zones,"[20] in entangled identities,[21] and in the notion of "community" replacing the one of "people."[22]

As for the history of religion\s, two recent ERC Advanced Grants have laid the groundwork for this research: "Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning 'cults' and 'polis religion'" (LAR), directed by Jörg Rüpke (University of Erfürt; 2012–2017) and "Mapping Ancient Polytheisms. Cult Epithets as an Interface between Religious Systems and Human Agency" (MAP), directed by Corinne Bonnet (University of Toulouse; 2017–2023). In many publications, the LAR team emphasized the role of religious agency performed by individuals and groups. Moreover, they shifted the attention from the accomplished narration of official religions as decoded in ancient texts or in academic disciplines to religion "in the making," their agents and their materiality.[23] In particular, for Roman religion, the notion of pantheon is finally understood as a fluid and open community reacting to various religious contacts.[24] The MAP project, while granting human agency a pivotal role, enhanced the understanding of gods – their names and images – as "systems of notions." Echoing the concept of "iconographic attribute," the MAP project developed the one of "onomastic attribute."[25] This allows to describe the linguistic and iconographical strategies necessary to name and represent the divine in terms of "onomastic sequence" and "iconographic sequence."[26] From a methodological perspective, the way divine images

16 Feldman 2014.
17 Uehlinger 2000.
18 Steiner and Killebrew 2013: 3.
19 Stordalen and LaBianca 2021: 6.
20 Sergi, Oeming, and Hulster 2016: 8–10.
21 Hitchcock and Maeir 2013.
22 Porter 2013. See also the activities of the six years program of the Minerva Center for the "Relations between Israel and Aram in Biblical Times" (RIAB; 2015–2021), co-directed by Aren M. Maeir (Bar Ilan University), and Angelika Berlejung (University of Leipzig).
23 Gasparini *et al.* 2020.
24 Bettini 2014; Rüpke 2018.
25 Bonnet *et al.* 2018.
26 The latter notion is not dissimilar from the one of "constellation" used by Keel and Uehlinger 1998.

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and names are built can be fruitfully compared and entangled,[27] and religion is interpreted as a form of experimental *bricolage*, that is to say a process of remodeling and recombining a diverse miscellany of existing elements.

Other pivotal paradigm shifts come from the galaxy of postcolonial studies. Firstly, postcolonial theory has great appeal for archaeologists and historians who are confronting the complexities of cultural responses to contact in their records. It helps to move away from binary oppositions between local and imported, and the essentialism inherent in interpreting every foreign artifact as the material trace of a foreign person, and vice versa. Theories such as "third space" or "middle ground" focus on in-betweenness rather than on opposed agents, one subordinated to the other. Despite the traditional diffusionist perspective and the opposition between core and periphery, they acknowledge a whole set of more sophisticated cultural dynamics.

Secondly, postcolonial studies contributed to the criticism against the model of the Nation-state: historians should be aware not only of the anachronistic use of such terminology for antiquity, but also of the cultural charge linked to this notion. In particular, the nationalistic lexicon of biblical texts is so rooted in our field that even studies adopting postcolonial perspectives use the concept of "nation," without problematizing it.[28] Doing so, notions such as "people," "nation," and "ethnic group" became increasingly interchangeable in biblical studies and apparently do not need any kind of methodological caution. However, in cognate fields, such as Phoenician studies, a lot of energy was put in rejecting[29] or, at least, problematizing and limiting the ethnic paradigm.[30] Much work must be done to get rid of the national/ethnic paradigm, that anthropologists criticize since many decades.[31]

Another benefit from the application of postcolonial studies to our field is the awareness of how much academic knowledge is not only deeply rooted in Christian theological faculties but also a socio-cultural construct of European scholarship. In other terms, "Orientalism," as a complex set of discourses – and stereotypes – aimed at constructing the Orient "as otherness" and tending to explain its past through its present, is still a lens through which our field of studies is distorted.[32] For instance, the religious history of the ancient Levant described as a juxtaposition of ethnic pantheons, each one dominated by the major deity of a "nation" or "tribe," suffers from an "Orientalistic" view and somehow risks to project the actual geo-political problems in the region. In addition to these historiographical problems, the burden of current circumstances should be considered, characterized not only by "significant barriers

27 See already Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 393–395.
28 Perdue, Carter, and Baker 2015.
29 Porzia 2018.
30 Quinn 2018; Garbati 2021.
31 Porzia 2018: 16–19.
32 Fabietti 2016; Porzia 2022.

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to pan-regional communication and scholarship,"[33] but also by a social – and therefore academic – bias, if not an openly stated boycott, based on personal agendas, which are not easily put aside and limit a truly comparative approach.

2.2. A Disciplinary Delay

Recent studies on the history of religion\s of the ancient Levant can be divided into two main kinds: (a) the context (the fortunate notion of *Umwelt* in German) of the Ancient Testament/Hebrew Bible, or studies focussing on ancient Israel and other cases as *comparandum*, as in the recent approach of YHWH's Doppelgängers[34] or "Frenemies;"[35] (b) lists of national/ethnic religions and local pantheons.[36] Both approaches are legitimate and understandable in the logic of editorial marketing. The first one, for instance, answers the bibliographical interests of many scholars and students primarily interested in Biblical Studies; the second one gives voice to the necessity of "normalizing" the history of ancient Israel (and Judah) as emphasized from the "Roman school" of Mario Liverani and Giovanni Garbini.[37] All in all, there is no doubt that the bibliography concerning the biblical god is hypertrophic.[38] Moreover, the approach of the "butterfly collector," which consists of listing one people or religion after the other, is highly criticized in anthropological literature,[39] but it is widely attested in our studies.[40]

As for the interactions between the different religious systems, attested only few kilometres away one from the other, the notion of syncretism is still prevailing.[41] And this despite the ongoing discussions among scholars on its etymology and definition, the genesis and history of the concept, the semantic variations that have affected it and, above all, the possibility or not of its heuristic value as a category applicable to the historical-religious and socio-anthropological field. Although some attempts to rehabilitate the notion or to define the conditions for its "good usage" exist, the main criticism against syncretism is that it points out as exceptional something that should instead be regarded as the norm. In other terms, religious mixes and trans-cultural and cross-fertilizing phenomena cannot longer be considered extraordinary phenomena

33 Routledge 2017: 52.
34 Cornell 2020; Tebes 2023.
35 Stahl 2021b.
36 See *supra*, n. 7.
37 Liverani 2007; Garbini 2008.
38 Römer 2015; Lewis 2020; Maiden 2020; Pfitzmann 2020; Fleming 2021; Flynn 2021; Stahl 2021a; Tebes and Frevel 2021; Stavrakopoulou 2022; Amzallag 2023.
39 Amselle 1998: 10.
40 See recently Doak 2020; Schmitt 2020.
41 Bonnet 2022; Xella 1999; 2009. See, recently, Rutherford 2020: 77–78; Warbinek and Giusfredi 2023.

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needing, as such, a specific nomenclature, and a theoretical frame. Features regarded as "religious" are, just like any human cultural manifestation, constantly affected by changes and transformations, as a result of contacts of various kinds with other aspects, in function of adaptation (conservation and/or innovation), through mechanisms of interpretation and reinterpretation. As a corollary, nothing is more erroneous than to assume that such changes have the effect of modifying stable cultural situations. There is no cultural monolith that is subject to transformation.[42] One could say, on the contrary, that every religion is syncretistic, and even that everything in religion is syncretistic from a social and historical perspective.

Building on the aforementioned paradigm shifts, we should find an alternative way to approach the Levantine divine landscape, grounded in three specific challenges to existing approaches: (a) the proliferation of religions and pantheons; (b) the national/ethnic paradigm; (c) the "fragmentation" or "balkanization" of the Levant in our studies. In recent years, however, we have encountered a confusing proliferation of titles and proposals describing religions in the plural[43] or even speaking of of micro- or macro-religions.[44] As for Biblical Studies, for instance, not only was the northern religion progressively distinguished from its southern version, but an even broader model of poly-yahwism was opposed to the Deuteronomic statement "YHWH *ʾeḥad*."[45] Although these attempts tried to preserve the attachment of the divine to local communities and to avoid theological generalizations, they also risked hypostatising local gods and cults into systems (often regarded in terms of pantheons). However, this means a methodological infraction of a well-established rule in history of religion\s: in antiquity there were not different religions; rather, there were different gods. As simple as it might seem, this implies a pivotal corollary: scholars must deal with networks of gods, cults, and traditions that cannot be a priori isolated and defined. The extent and the modalities of the distinctiveness or diversity[46] between these gods is what should be determined in further studies.

42 Xella 2009: 137.
43 Zevit 2001; Hess 2007; Stavrakopoulou and Barton 2010; Snell 2011; Faust 2020; Schmitt 2020.
44 Hutton 2010: 150–151.
45 Pfitzmann 2021.
46 For this distinction see, in particular, Uehlinger 2015.

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3. Heuristic Notions

3.1. Networks of Gods and Gods as Networks

Speaking of gods, it is crucial to clarify the way they are conceptualized. The one-million-dollar question for each historian of religion\s – what is a god? – has been extensively discussed for Classic religion,[47] and has recently aroused interest in the fields of Hittite[48] and Mesopotamian[49] religion, but is barely addressed for the Levant.[50] There, as we already noticed, the habitual focus on local pantheons or certain deities is still prevailing, although scholars are keen to identify common type-gods, such as the "weather god," the "smiting god," or simply acknowledging a common backdrop to Levantine religion,[51] or even "the ability of some divine personalities to 'move' between different cultural contexts".[52]

In the field of Greek religion, the so-called French School – including scholars like Georges Dumézil, Louis Gernet, Jean-Pierre Vernant, and Marcel Detienne – stressed that scholars should regard gods not as persons but rather as "systems of notions"[53] or "divine powers" (*puissances divines*),[54] or even that each god should be considered as a "mini-pantheon."[55] For Mesopotamian religion, the large spectrum of entities – animate and inanimate – that can be considered divine in cuneiform sources leads scholars to pose the notion of agency as a central focus when defining gods, rather than the one of person or anthropomorphism. According to this view, Beate Pongratz-Leisten defined deities in the polytheistic systems of ancient Mesopotamia as entities that could act with intention, and which were responsible for maintaining the cosmic order (and thus effective and "powerful" as proposed by Jean-Pierre Vernant). Such a system includes not only the major (anthropomorphic) gods but also all kinds of cultic paraphernalia, statues, symbols, and celestial bodies: in defining a god, "agency is what counts."[56]

Moreover, historians of religion\s are aware of the limits of our modern notion of "god," largely dependent, at least in Western literature, on monotheistic assumptions. Dealing with polytheistic religions, however, needs a differ-

47 Recently for the Greek religion, see Henrichs 2010; Parker 2011: 64–102; Pirenne-Delforge and Pironti 2015.
48 Taracha 2010; Warbinek and Giusfredi 2023.
49 Porter 2000; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik 2015.
50 Gericke 2017; Hundley 2022: 144–152; Guillon and Porzia 2023.
51 Xella 2014: 530.
52 Garbati 2019, 21.
53 Gernet and Boulanger 1932: 265–276.
54 Vernant 1965: 79.
55 Durand 1991; Jaillard 2007: 16.
56 Allen 2015: 35.

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ent understanding of the divine.[57] According to the paradigm shift in the historiography of Greek and Mesopotamian religions, from the study of gods *per se*, as individuals or persons, to the apprehension of gods as dynamic relational systems of notions and effective powers, this research regards each Levantine god as "plastic," moving, and often polysemic network of elements. They are understood in terms of "material entanglements" that, according to Philipp W. Stockhammer, signifies the creation of new entities "that are more than just the sum of [their] parts and combine the familiar with the previously foreign."[58] Understanding Levantine gods as "material entanglements" makes room for their study in terms of networks. This does not only mean that gods can be studied as they interact with one another, but also that their constitutive elements, mobilized by human agency, can be understood as parts of a limited stock of common features.

This is particularly true in the first millennium Levant where, despite the hundreds of deities attested in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Anatolia, small pantheons are attested, not exceeding ten gods and usually not more than five. These gods seem, moreover, mobilized for any sort of issue, without specific domains, an observation that clashes with what has long been considered one of the pillars of all polytheism: the division of specializations and areas of influence between the different deities. The study of such "small polytheisms" (or "oligotheisms"),[59] with the generic divine communities it entails ("and all the gods of the city," *repha'im*, etc.), can help to rethink the too often dichotomic opposition between polytheisms and monotheism.

3.2. Cultural Infrastructure

The existence of a commonality of style and cultural expressions in the ancient Levant is self-evident, although the dynamics and interpretation of how such a commonality established and subsisted can be debated by scholars. In other regions, like Greece, such phenomenon is explained thanks to the feeling of a pan-Hellenic belonging, despite the political fragmentation of the *poleis*. In this case, one can speak of a bottom-up self-consciousness (if our literary evidence can be considered as a voice coming "from the bottom"). As for the Levant, however, a (pan-)Levantine awareness is never explicitly stated in our sources; only a certain top-down uniformity, i. e. from our scholarly perspective, exists. The Aramaic, Phoenician, Philistine, Israelite, Judean and Transjordanian worlds share socio-political, linguistic, and material culture elements. Although always locally adapted, the cultural contiguity of these elements can be

57 Brelich 2007.
58 Stockhammer 2013: 17.
59 On this notion, see Porzia forthcoming.

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explained, on the one hand, by the common history of these social communities and the fact that they have shared the same foreign dominations (the "Egyptian-Levantine *koine*" analyzed by Thomas Staubli),[60] and, on the other, by the territorial contiguity that characterizes these areas. Such a contiguity, besides the political fragmentation and the variety of the geographical and environmental landscapes, has always favored wide-spread regional circulation. Moreover, a crucial factor for regional commonality is represented by royal ideology. Already in the second millennium BCE, all the "small kings" of the region shared a common ideology, which was largely inspired from the "great kings" of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia, that they emulated. Although one can claim for micro-regionally defined or polity-bound symbol systems in the Levant, they are in most cases the result of salience, composition, and specific hierarchy of elements which are not *per se* exclusive but attested also in neighboring areas.

In this scenario, the notion of "cultural infrastructure" seems to be particularly effective. The notion is derived by Pirhiya Beck who, in a study devoted to cult stands from Iron II Judah, introduced the idea of an "iconographic infrastructure" operating in the Levant, where different models circulated and were appropriated and adapted by local workshops.[61] By widening this notion from iconography to the larger set of cultural expressions, the notion of cultural infrastructure entails that different societies shared a semantic universe in terms of common symbol system and visual and literary culture, including not only motifs or patterns but also meanings, interpretations, expressions, and the organization of space, social and gender relations, and hierarchy. It implies that when constructing their productions – be they material culture, artistic or religious – each agent had at disposal a whole set of shared elements, which made the final production understandable and transposable from one region to another, and only rarely, under peculiar historical circumstances, mutually exclusive. While this is increasingly recognized for material culture and artistic expressions in general, the application of this model for divinities – both on onomastic and iconographic level – is still in an embryonic stage.

3.3. Transposability

To tell the truth, the notions of "intercultural translation" or "translatability" of deities introduced by Jan Assmann and developed by Mark S. Smith tackled with this issue. However, while advocating the recognition of others' divinity across – and even despite – cultural and geographic boundaries, these notions remain deeply embedded in the traditional image of the Levantine ethnic mosaic. Mark S. Smith, for instance, emphasizes the translatability of national

60 Staubli 2016.
61 Beck 2000: 167.

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gods,[62] and Jan Assmann states that "the conviction that God or the gods are international was characteristic of the polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East."[63] The concept of "nation" lies central in the translation theory of the divine and finally becomes an argument to deal once more with the ancient Levant through the ethnic lens.

The present approach, instead, aims to overturn this perspective. Although highly appreciable in their purpose, the models of "translatability" or even the one of "code-switching" introduced by Tatiana Pedrazzi for material culture,[64] rely too much on a linguistic paradigm and on the idea of systematic and coherent inter-cultural transfers from one system to another one. The phenomena of cultural adoption and adaptation, however, seem to respond to cross-cultural and non-systematic dynamics, and might be better explained by the notion of "transposability."

Transposability not only is more connected to materiality and less with linguistics, but also does not imply a bijective correlation between two elements, where the second one (the translation) depends on the first one (the translated), nor the possibility that such a correlation can be qualified as right or wrong. Transposability describes situations where the same elements are attested and re-combined in new contexts, thanks to the phenomenon of "multistability," that is to say their possibility to convey multiple – but still equally valid – interpretations simultaneously.[65] Speaking of divinities, transposability does not aim at identifying and mapping the "same" gods and goddesses or one of their features all around the region, nor to conceive them in terms of schemas that can be generalized and repeated. What is at stake here is not the repetition of the identical but the creation of variety. In particular, transposability and multistability emphasize the agency of human actors variously involved with the religious dimension to "pose" and "stabilize" specific divine features according to their need or creativity of the moment. Finally, these notions disclose how deities of different places can still be perceived and analysed – by scholars as well as, although in different ways, by ancient people – as "peers" performing and embodying in very similar ways their agency.

3.4. Levant

The eastern Mediterranean area belongs to a region which has been referred to in very different ways over time: Phoenicia, Palestine, Syria Palaestina, land of Canaan, even Holy Land. The absence of consensus regarding its terminology

62 Smith 2010: 119.
63 Assmann 1998: 45.
64 Pedrazzi 2020: 965.
65 LeMon 2010: 111–112, 192–193.

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is determined by the fact that this region is, more than any other region in the world, a "land which was mentally constructed by man."[66]

The term "Levant," as it is also the case with "Near" or "Middle East," is a Euro- or Western-centric nomenclature with a colonialist burden. Moreover, being for a long time considered as an interface between Orient and Occident, the Levant has been regarded as a mixed and composed reality, understood, as such, in a negative way. For instance, "Levantinism" and "Levantinization" became common categories in the Israeli debate about cultural theory and identity in the second part of last century, especially after the endorsement made by the influential intellectual Jaqueline Kahanoff.[67]

Historically speaking, in spite of its fragmentation and complexity, it is quite remarkable that the eastern Mediterranean is defined, each period in its own way, by a high degree of uniformity which has favored, in specialized literature, the elaboration of concepts such as "regional system"[68] or, from a diplomatic point of view, "internationalism,"[69] from an economic point of view, "globalism,"[70] indeed "world system network,"[71] or even, from an artistic perspective, "international style,"[72] "elite emulation"[73] and, more recently, "community of style,"[74] and "art of contact."[75] However, requests for a broader definition of the this region from historians and archaeologists are surprisingly rare, with the exception of the already mentioned notions of "Levantinism," suggested by Margreet L. Steiner and Ann E. Killebrew, and "Levantine entanglements," evoked by Terje Stordalen and Øystein S. LaBianca.

The term "Levant," which is far from being consensual,[76] is employed here to designate at the same time a historical problem and a meaningful unity but not, as already correctly stressed by Pirhiya Beck for the segment "Southern-Levant," a "cultural unity."[77] Firstly, Levant can still be used as a geographic and relative nomenclature, deliberately without precise borders. It covers a space situated at the interface between the Mediterranean and inner Syria and Mesopotamia, and between Anatolia and the Arabic peninsula and Egypt. Secondly, the Levant is, as any other chronological or geographic delimitation, a scholars' construction. Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge that we are dealing with a heuristic notion challenging and correcting the traditional national and

66 Giardina, Liverani, and Scarcia Amoretti 1987: 9–12.
67 Ohana 2011: 77–97; Carlino 2006.
68 Liverani 2014: 278–282.
69 Liverani 1994.
70 LaBianca and Scham 2014.
71 Panitz-Cohen 2013: 549–550.
72 Caubet 1998.
73 Higginbotham 2000.
74 Feldman 2014.
75 Martin 2017.
76 See, recently, Stavrakopoulou 2022: ix.
77 Beck 2000: 181.

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ethnic delimitations. By advocating a multi-scalar perspective which transcends political borders, the Levant is regarded as a meaningful unity where, within its cultural diversity and variety, different meanings were produced, cumulated and confronted, and where, at least since the second millennium BCE, several forms of *koinai* co-existed.

3.5. Glocalization and Adaption

Such a peculiar situation not only requires a solid interdisciplinary dialogue between specialists of different cultural areas; considering the Levant as a meaningful unity also raises the issue of how to articulate "the local" and "the particular" with "the (supra-/inter-)regional," "the general," or even the "global," poles that have been often thought as being in tension if not in opposition.

The study of religious phenomena in multi-ethnic societies or in politically fragmented contexts must keep the local component in mind. Such a tendency has, for example, been emphasized by Michele Cammarosano for the Hittite religion, and by Hans Beck for the Greek religion.[78] While the first case is regarded as a peculiar melting pot derived from several cultural traditions centralized by a central power, the case of the Greek *polis*, despite its strong territorial anchorage, has often been studied in terms of pan-Hellenic religion following, among others, the lesson of Herodotus (VIII, 144.2). If the future of Hittite and Greek religious studies will have to pay more attention to the local component, distinguishing between the notions of "dynastic pantheon," "state religion," or "*polis* religion" as politically determined and "local religion" as determined by the local environment and geography,[79] for the Levantine world we are faced with a diametrically opposite situation. Here, localism is regarded as the only perspective to interpret religious phenomena without taking seriously its regional and supra-regional levels, so to speak the (pan-)Levantine dimension.

In recent decades, religious-historical studies have increasingly relied on notions such as those of globalization and glocalization, although the "glocal turn" has not affected much the study of antiquity.[80] These approaches argue that the duality between global and local should be dismissed as "a false dichotomy,"[81] and can be understood in terms of "nonadversarial relationship."[82] In particular, the notion of glocalization has gained an "analytical autonomy vis-à-vis other related concepts (local, global),"[83] and designates the local refractions of global aspects. The metaphor of the refraction not only implies that

78 Cammarosano 2018; Beck 2020.
79 Beck 2020: 130–133. See also, on a comparative level, Rutherford 2020.
80 See, however, van Alten 2017.
81 Kindt 2012: 130–131; see also Robertson 1995: 35.
82 Roudometof 2018: 3.
83 Roudometof 2016: 397.

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transversal aspects are only partially reflected on a local level, but also that "the local is not annihilated or absorbed or destroyed by globalization but, rather, operates symbiotically with globalization and shapes the telos or end state or result. [...] Globalization is responsible both for homogeneity and heterogeneity. In glocalization, the global and the local shape the end state. The result is heterogeneity."[84]

The notion of glocalization, built on the one of globalization, derives from economics and from a capitalistic perspective. It can only be applied as an analogical and heuristic tool to our field, where it has sometimes been regarded as "a rather ugly portmanteau" and a complex jargon for explaining "what should, in any case, be fairly obvious."[85] However, to readdress the misleading issue of the global-local binary in the Levantine religious studies, the image of the Levant as a space for glocalization seems particularly helpful, where the global and local are taken together and are not studied in isolation or opposition. Conceiving glocalization not as a process leading to cultural homogeneity, but as a complex dynamic in which external cultural elements were developed on a global and local scale, both in top-down and bottom-up directions, helps to understand how divinities reverberated local refractions of features transposed from the regional cultural infrastructure. These divinities can finally be regarded as a multitude of glocalities, where "glocality is defined as experiencing the global locally or through local lenses."[86]

This perspective, finally, argues against a monolithic and essentialist understanding of divinities. On the contrary, divinities are constantly assimilated, not in the cultural and political sense that we give to this term, but in its "digestive" sense: in a manner of speaking, divinities are interiorized, metabolized, even "cannibalized," to paraphrase the vocabulary used by the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.[87] More properly, the different elements composing their profile are constantly appropriated and recomposed, adopted and adapted. To stress this double process and the contemporaneity of the two actions, one could even use the term "adaption" in a new way, not only as a synonym of "adaptation." Inspired by Jaques Derrida's "différAnce,"[88] "adaption" can unify the notions of adoption and adaptation and keep them together dialectically. Rather than the traditional models of "syncretism," "diffusionism," "hybridization," or "creolization," which risk being too descriptive and failing to understand the dynamics at work, "adaption" implies three systematic aspects: 1) there is no adoption without adaptation; 2) the idea of original purity is misleading, as if the purpose of human actions was the eternal reproduction of the identical, and variations only depended on – greater or

84 Roudometof 2016: 399.
85 Susan Sherrat in Barrett *et al.* 2018: 13–14.
86 Roudometof 2016: 401.
87 Viveiros de Castro 2009.
88 Derrida 1972.

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fewer – personal skills; 3) the meanings are not static but always plural, shifting, and often fuzzy (especially from our perspective).[89] Employing "adaption" as the basic framework for understanding the intercultural and glocal dynamics attested in the religious realm showcases how divinities are at the same time locally constructed while being regionally meaningful and understandable.

4. Beyond Ethnicity: From Pantheons to Divine Landscape

Although we must confess that our knowledge is quite limited, Levantine religious systems have often been described as less "sophisticated" because they seem much poorer in details and nuances than the Egyptian or Mesopotamian counterparts (not to speak about Greece or Rome). This approach aims at readdressing the apparent simplicity of Levantine deities from a different methodological perspective: cultural infrastructure, transposability, and adaption. Moreover, looking at our documentation beyond the ethnogeography, we can better appreciate the design of a religious landscape with its "homogeneity of broad outlines, not of details."[90]

Of special importance is the gradual extension of Arjun Appadurai's notion of -scapes[91] into the area of religion. Although religion is not included within his original typology of -scapes, the notions of godscape,[92] religious landscape or religioscape have been increasingly introduced into social-scientific discourse, the latter being variously defined as a religious mental map or the actual distribution in spaces of the physical manifestations of specific religious traditions.[93] In the present approach, the notion of "divine landscape," informed by glocalization, is then preferred to "pantheon," the latter being normally conceived as ethnically- and politically-bounded, locally determined and only loosely connected to a broader level. Moreover, it better reflects the continuity in different places than the metaphors of porous, or even liquid, societies, and provides a solid basis for the study of religious phenomena within the broader Mediterranean context.

The idea of religious exclusivity in terms of an exclusive relationship between a deity and a specific people has long left in the background the fact that such deities could share many features. Behind this idea there is certainly the biblical matrix that makes Israel an *ʿam segulah*, the object of a jealous belonging on the part of their God. Such an understanding has, moreover, been widely crit-

89 Porzia 2024.
90 Graf 2007: 7.
91 Appadurai 1990.
92 This is the title, for instance, of the Research Project of National Interest "GodScapes: Modeling Second Millennium BCE Polytheisms in the Eastern Mediterranean," coordinated by Nicola Laneri (University of Catania; 2021–2024).
93 Respectively Hayden and Walker 2013, and McAlister 2005.

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icized for attributing to the people an elaborate historical vocation,[94] or even for promoting a "racist chauvinism"[95] or a "tribal Judeocentrism."[96] Beyond the peculiar case of ancient Israel and YHWH, it is also true that few other Near Eastern divinities are constructed as "ontologically" and "onomastically" linked to their territory/population: Aššur is certainly the most eloquent example, in which the determinative makes it possible to distinguish whether the term refers to the god, the city or the entire territory. However, these examples do not contradict the fact that YHWH or Aššur were part of a divine landscape, and that they were both active and passive actors, i.e. drivers and receivers of innovative, innovated, or transposed elements.

Finally, this approach promotes a methodological reflection on how scholars organize and read their material even before they explicitly start to interpret it. In particular, it challenges the "obsession" to read the Levant through the metaphor of the mosaic, where each element needs to be assigned to a geographic and cultural origin or to be anchored to a specific ethnic or political configuration. Accordingly, deities are to be understood not as persons, but as fluid networks of notions constructed from a shared cultural infrastructure. The different elements – whether onomastic, iconographic, or more generically descriptive – that constitute these material entanglements that we call deities are recomposed and transposed in different ways to create ever new though similar deities in the meaningful unity that is the Levant. Understood as locally contingent but at the same time intelligible on a regional scale within the Levantine landscape, the divine is continually subject to adaption, a twofold movement of adoption and adaptation, rather than being copied, exported/imported, borrowed, or shared.

As a result, the study of Levantine gods can focus on how they never ceased to be constructed and adapted in the *longue durée* responding to dynamics such as cross-cultural fertilization, emulation, and competition. If the Levant is very often described as a strongly interconnected world, the various elements of which – its different communities – participated in the construction of shared traditions, it is time to explore to what extent gods and goddesses, although being fictive agents, contributed to the construction of such a landscape.

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94 Halevi 1956.
95 Leibowitz 1992: 86.
96 Sand 2013: 143.

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